



Preservation Hotline #7

South Carolina Department of
Archives & History
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**State Historic
Preservation Office**
<http://shpo.sc.gov/>

Grave Concerns: Protecting and Repairing Historic Cemeteries

Historic cemeteries in South Carolina are often threatened by damage, whether from acts of vandalism or from natural disasters like thunderstorms or hurricanes. Immediate response is often necessary after cemeteries and stones have been damaged, but long-term planning is often the best means to make sure our historic burial grounds are protected for future generations.

After a natural or man-made disaster, there are several appropriate steps to take in the care and cleanup of historic cemeteries.

Record the damage

- ◆ Map all features that have been damaged. Using a cemetery map, mark the stones, tombs, markers, fences, walls, paths, and vegetation that have been damaged. If no map is available, a hand-drawn sketch identifying the location of each feature will serve this purpose.
- ◆ Record the present condition of each affected feature. Sketch the location of the affected stone and describe the damage. Be precise! Take photographs in addition to the written record, if possible. A good record will include information about the location, the damage, the materials, the condition, and the size of the site and its components. It will also note previous repairs, record inscriptions, identify motifs and design elements of the various features, and indicate where fragments are stored.

Begin the Cleanup Process

- ◆ Use care. Historic markers are fragile. If there are broken markers, do not step on the fragments. If trees and limbs have fallen on markers, carefully cut limbs away in small sections, carrying them away as you work. Do not let the limbs fall on the stones beneath them.
- ◆ Photograph the broken markers both before and after the removal of trees and limbs.
- ◆ Carefully remove pieces of the broken stones, only after double-checking your documentation. Once you have moved a stone, it will be impossible to remember which direction it faced, its precise location, or the details of its construction.
- ◆ Do not discard fragments. Fragments that seem insignificant can be vital to later restoration efforts.

- ◆ Store fragments in boxes, in a dry, indoor, undisturbed location. Record on the box information about the fragment; where it came from, when it was damaged, why it was removed, and the inscription, if possible. Never write on the fragments themselves!



Plan for repairs

Before you begin repair of markers, you need to understand proper conservation methods. Improper repairs can inflict irreparable damage on both markers and the site itself. A selected list of resources is given at the end of this fact sheet to help you plan appropriate conservation treatments for damaged cemeteries.

Plan for the long-term

Once you have identified, recorded and temporarily secured the damaged markers and other features, you should begin planning for the long-term management and care of the cemetery. A well-prepared master preservation plan will provide much needed information in the event of damage to the cemetery, as well as providing detailed information for its day-to-day maintenance. A good plan places the site in its cultural and historical context, identifies management considerations, recommends conservation treatments, and develops a maintenance schedule. Use the following checklist when preparing a master plan:

- ◆ maps
- ◆ detailed surveys of all major features
- ◆ chain of ownership
- ◆ historical and cultural evaluation

- ◆ conditions assessment
- ◆ recommended approaches to preserving landscape features
- ◆ recommended conservation treatments
- ◆ management considerations like visitor traffic and safety, lighting, security, and funding
- ◆ maintenance planning

For more information

McGahee, Susan and Mary Edmonds. *South Carolina's Historic Cemeteries: A Preservation Handbook*. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1997 (laws and biography updated 2007). The text is available on the Archives and History website at <http://www.shpo.sc.gov/cemeteryinfo.htm>

Strangstad, Lynette. *Preservation of Historic Burial Grounds*. National Trust for Historic Preservation, Revised 2003. To order this booklet contact the National Trust for Historic Preservation at 202-588-6296 or visit the online bookstore at www.preservationbooks.org/

Strangstad, Lynette. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer*. Association for Gravestone Studies, 1995. To order this book contact the Association for Gravestone Studies at 413-772-0836 or visit the online bookstore at www.gravestonestudies.org/store/books/preservation_information.htm

Trinkley, Michael. *Grave Matters: The Preservation of African-American Cemeteries*. Chicora Foundation, 1995. To order this booklet contact the Chicora Foundation, PO Box 8664, Columbia, SC 29202, or at 803-787-6910. Visit Chicora Foundation online at <http://chicora.org>.

_____. *Recording Historic Cemeteries: A Guide for Historical Societies and Genealogists*. Chicora Foundation. To order this booklet contact the Chicora Foundation, PO Box 8664, Columbia, SC 29202, or at 803-787-6910. Visit Chicora Foundation online at <http://chicora.org>.

The following websites also contain information on the study and preservation of cemeteries:

The Association for Gravestone Studies
www.gravestonestudies.org

South Carolina Department of Archives & History
www.shpo.sc.gov/cempres

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